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# The Bannings on the Magic Isle

## Santa Catalina Island, 1892–1919

BY TOM SITTON

*"Vacationlands may appear like territories of freedom, freedom from work, worries, rules, and regulations. But behind this carefree facade there are many unwritten rules."*

ORVAR LÖFGREN, *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing*<sup>1</sup>

In March 1958, the pop single "26 Miles (Santa Catalina)" peaked at number two on the national pop music charts.<sup>2</sup> The song romanticized a small island located a few miles closer to the southern California coastline than its title indicated. No doubt the song's wide airplay and sales of the record totaling over a million copies made Santa Catalina familiar to many potential tourists from around the country and further publicized the amenities that had attracted visitors to this Pacific resort since the late 1800s. More than half a century after the song's release, the island is still a thriving haven for pleasure seekers each summer.

Santa Catalina, or the "Magic Isle,"<sup>3</sup> emerged as a vacation retreat during the late nineteenth century, when the makeup of American resorts in the East was changing and tourist venues in the West were appearing on a vast scale. It shared many similarities with established eastern counterparts and new competitors on the Pacific Coast, but it differed from most in the manner in which it was managed by its early owners, the Banning family. For almost thirty years, from the late Gilded Age through the Progressive Era, Santa Catalina was a contested paradise—open

to some visitors, closed to others, and subject to an ongoing struggle between the Bannings, who owned approximately 90 percent of the island, and many of its permanent residents regarding governance and operation. On a small scale, the Banning proprietorship reflects traditional values, the changes occurring in the state and the nation during the Progressive Era, and the contrast to the modern era that followed.

### A NEW WAVE IN TOURISM

The ownership of an island paradise from 1892 to 1919 would come at a fortuitous time for the Bannings. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, commodious seaside resorts offering long summer vacations for the wealthy in grand hotels and shorter stays for the middle class became popular vacation spots on both American coasts. Eastern resorts in locations such as Saratoga Springs and Coney Island in New York, Newport in Rhode Island, and White Sulphur Springs in West Virginia offered a variety of living accommodations and amusements for those seeking leisure, recreation, and health rejuvenation. Some, like Newport, catered to the very wealthy and gradually became com-



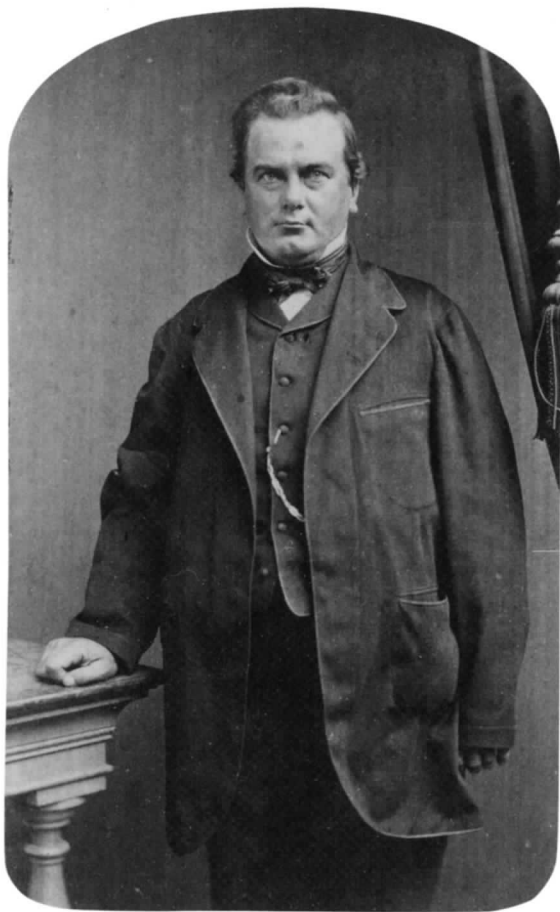


munities of private mansions. Others increased their commercial interest with the addition of sporting events and special attractions for the elite as well as for the less affluent. These and other venues competed for the tourist dollar with long-established sites such as Niagara Falls and other majestic scenes of nature.<sup>4</sup>

After the Civil War, the American Wild West became a favorite region for tourism upon the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Eastern visitors were enamored with natural landscapes such as Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, buffalo herds on the open plains, and Rocky Mountain hunting grounds. Eventually, the ski slopes of Colorado, the Sin City casinos and lavish shows of Las Vegas, and megaresorts in Hawaii became favored destinations.<sup>5</sup>

*A Banning steamer docks at Avalon harbor on Santa Catalina Island in 1911. From 1892, when they purchased the island, until its sale in 1919, the Bannings helped transform Avalon from a nascent island paradise to a thriving resort community twenty-two miles from the southern California shore.*

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*Phineas Banning (1830–1885), entrepreneur, California state senator, and southern California’s “Transportation King,” was the founder of the town of Wilmington at the port of San Pedro and of a staging and shipping company prior to the Civil War. His ship, the SS Amelia, was the first steam vessel on the Wilmington-Catalina run from 1880 to 1883. His main residence, built in Wilmington in 1864, operates today as a museum depicting life in California during the Victorian era.*

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California emerged as the “ultimate goal of western travel” with grand hotels—such as the Hotel Del Coronado in San Diego and the Del Monte in Monterey—that served Californians as well as easterners and midwesterners escaping cold winters or seeking more comfortable summers. Summer resorts in northern California boasting mineral hot springs to restore health and other features operated by the 1880s. In the following decades, interest in the deteriorating but romanticized California missions and other aged landmarks sparked attention that would mushroom in the new century with the affordability and popularity of automobiles and the improvements of roads in the Golden State.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1870s, the railroad initiated a thriving tourist industry in southern California. Besides the grand Hotel Del Coronado, tourist hotels were built in the 1880s on the beaches of Santa Barbara, Santa Monica, and Redondo, offering a certain amount of luxury and phenomenal ocean views, and in suburban inland towns such as Pasadena, Pomona, and Riverside. For many locals and visitors, they were the places to see and be seen. Regional boosters helped to promote them by popularizing the image of southern California’s landscape and salubrious climate as a Mediterranean paradise that earlier had captivated health seekers and potential homeowners who had flocked to the region in large numbers. The Bannings capitalized on this promotional campaign and on the regional setting to create a retreat for the economically fortunate, where they could relax, socialize, and participate in the recreational activities of an accessible Pacific island that offered an abundance of opportunities to enjoy the good life.<sup>7</sup>

## CALIFORNIA’S MAGIC ISLE

Santa Catalina, located about twenty-two miles off the southern California coast, is one of eight Channel Islands between Santa Barbara and San Diego. Measuring some twenty-two miles long and ranging from a half mile at its isthmus to eight miles in width, it comprises almost seventy-five square miles of mountains and canyons with beaches at several points.<sup>8</sup>

After the Spanish colonization of California beginning in 1769, the island became a base for Russian sea otter hunters traveling from northern California, New England smugglers hoping to avoid Mexican trade laws and taxes, and various fishing enterprises. Ownership of the island passed to a number of absentee landlords in the 1800s as mainland businessmen raised sheep and goats there and as a mineral boom in the early 1860s brought mining claims to the island’s interior.<sup>9</sup>

Another party interested in Santa Catalina was Phineas Banning, one of many easterners who migrated to southern California in the mid-nineteenth century and played a critical role in the region's economic development. Born in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1830, Banning arrived at San Pedro Bay in late 1851 and within a decade built a transportation business at the harbor, which he later incorporated as the Wilmington Transportation Company (WTC) in 1884. He provided lightering, stevedoring, and other services for commercial ships; purchased and sold lumber and other commodities; and transported freight and passengers to points throughout the Southwest. Since 1859, Banning had organized excursions to Santa Catalina for friends and business associates, and in the early 1880s, his company's steamship, *Amelia*, provided weekly trips there for vacationing campers. Banning became so infatuated with the island's resort and mining potential that he tried to purchase it with a partner in 1883. Before he could make arrangements, he was struck down by an express wagon in San Francisco and withdrew his interest in the island as ill health over his remaining two years became a more immediate concern.<sup>10</sup>

In 1887, another southern California entrepreneur purchased Santa Catalina for \$200,000 with the same intention as Banning. Michigan native George R. Shatto, who was making a fortune as a Los Angeles developer during the region's real estate boom, envisioned a pleasure resort at the island's southern point. He called the site Avalon, a name said to have been chosen by his sister-in-law after reading Tennyson's epic poem *Idylls of the King*. Like so many southern California developers in the 1880s, Shatto set out town lots to sell in his new city and, in the tradition of eastern and newer California resorts, erected the grand Hotel Metropole as the central focus of his real estate promotion. To finance the venture, he enticed the International Mining Syndicate of Birmingham, England, to buy a

large portion of the island over three years. The syndicate leaders tried to make a profit from mining silver, but within a short time they defaulted on their payments. That failure left Shatto short of cash as his expenses mounted and as buyers hesitated to purchase lots during the ensuing real estate bust.<sup>11</sup>

In this milieu, Banning's three sons made their move. William, Joseph, and Hancock Banning had taken over their father's harbor business after Phineas's death in 1885. Like him, they had a special interest in Santa Catalina, having vacationed there during the summers and having been involved in the transport of visitors to and from the island. In 1889, they increased the number of their WTC trips and expressed an interest in building a hotel. The next year, William heard a rumor of the impending failure of the English mining syndicate and informed Shatto that the three brothers were prepared to purchase the island.<sup>12</sup>

As Shatto tried to obtain a loan to save his investment, William appealed to W. W. Stow and Charles Crocker, who served on the board of the trust holding Shatto's mortgage, to resist approving delays in payments. These influential officials of the Southern Pacific Railroad, the most powerful corporation in California at the time, had been close business associates and onetime employers of Phineas Banning and currently were working closely with his sons. They came through for the brothers. In January 1892, the *Express* announced an agreement to transfer ownership of Santa Catalina Island and the Bannings took control of the entire island, except for lots Shatto had already sold to individuals and one previous mining claim. Each brother now owned one-third of Banning property on Santa Catalina. Shatto returned to his Los Angeles real estate interests, served as a city police commissioner, and died in a railroad accident the year following the sale.<sup>13</sup>

## BUILDING A PLEASURE ISLAND

To compete with tourist hotels on the southern California coastline and in the region's interior locations, the Bannings immediately set their sights on creating a new venue. They began with major improvements in expectation of large crowds of summer vacationers. Along with the steamship *Warrior*, they remodeled the *Falcon*, a WTC steam tugboat, as a double-deck passenger ship. They brought in carpenters to repair and enlarge the Hotel Metropole, while outside parties constructed additional hotels. A pavilion stretching ninety feet in diameter was built near the beach "for dancing and other amusements." An army of engineers expanded the waterworks, streets, and the sanitation system and constructed fences and bathhouses for swimmers. Hundreds of trees were planted and a new wharf was built for Banning steamers.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to the method employed by Shatto and a legion of his contemporary southern California real estate developers, the Bannings did not sell lots, but rather leased them—a policy that allowed them to control their property but irritated lessees who wanted to buy home and business sites. Their main business objective was transportation income: From the start, the brothers' strategy was to develop Santa Catalina as a resort in order to profit from transporting passengers. To attract tourists to the island, they built amenities such as the dance pavilion that visitors could use at no charge as long as they paid the full price of a round-trip ticket on a WTC vessel. Ownership of most of the island and the outlay of large sums for improvements that would not be recouped were the Bannings' justifications for their belief in holding a monopoly on transportation of visitors to and from the island. This idea soon would evolve into a policy of preventing "tramp boats" from sneaking passengers onto the island, and the Bannings would become known for their confrontations with interlopers.<sup>15</sup>

WTC passengers certainly had plenty of options for recreation. Sport fishing became legendary as photographs of anglers and their catches appeared on postcards and in all promotional material. A fleet of yachts, power launches, and rowboats were on hand for fishing or pleasure boating. Swimming in the Pacific was popular along the crescent-shaped Avalon beach, as was hiking and exploring the island to experience nature and to see evidence of former Indian habitation. Hunting wild goats and quail was allowed in some portions of the island's interior. A well-designed nine-hole golf course beckoned those who wished to play. Stage rides through parts of the interior could prove exciting as drivers took passengers down steep grades and around tight curves in coaches pulled by six spirited horses.<sup>16</sup>

For those seeking less strenuous activities, the pavilion was open for dancing every night during the season, and concerts by the Santa Catalina Island Marine Band were held every day. A "monster skating tent" operated by a concessionaire was available, and an aquarium containing large and small tanks that featured a multitude of sea creatures opened in July 1899. Glass-bottom boats allowed passengers the thrill of observing the fish below them, as they do to this day.<sup>17</sup>

Accommodations for island visitors ranged from the elegant Metropole and other hotels, to a few houses and cottages belonging to the Bannings and other residents, to tent cottages available for rent. "Canvas cities" featuring row upon row of elaborate tents appeared at several locations, and living in them was an experience enjoyed by most visitors. Future lawyer and civic leader Marshall Stimson, a frequent tent camper in his youth, recalled, "Camp life at Avalon had many amusing episodes. Amateur cooks produced various odors, appetizing and otherwise. Silhouette night tent scenes and loud conversations contributed to community entertainment." A typical day for Stimson and other young people included fishing and swimming in the morning, taking



girls out rowing after lunch, making fun of the new arrivals (many of whom were seasick) when the steamer arrived about 6 P.M., then attending a band concert after dinner and dancing until 11 P.M. at the pavilion. "No place on earth could have provided a more lovely opportunity for good, healthy enjoyment and informal social intercourse than Catalina Island," he wrote.<sup>18</sup>

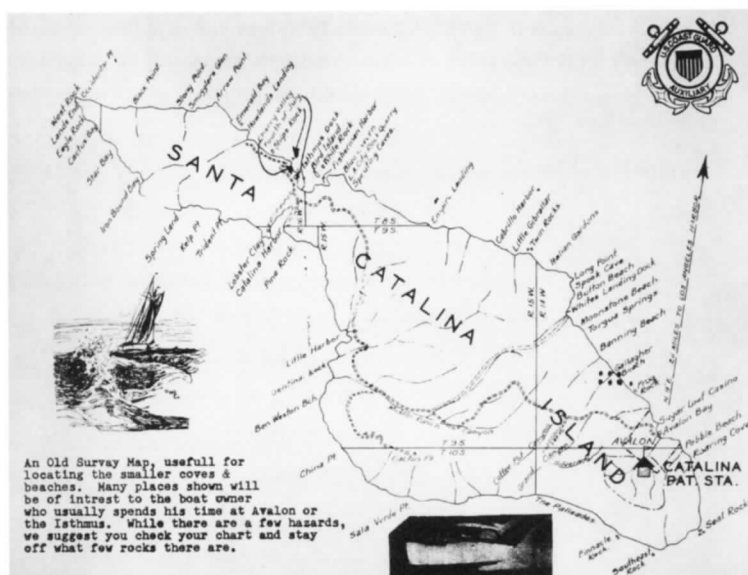
In the mainstream of a highly organized southern California promotional operation—orchestrated by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the Southern Pacific Railroad, and other boosters with vested interests to attract visitors, new residents, and new capital—the Bannings carried out an increasingly ambitious publicity campaign. They advertised in newspapers and magazines in California and Arizona. Newspaper reporters from the Midwest and the East who were lured to Santa Catalina often wrote flattering descriptions of the island "Where Every Prospect Pleases." The Santa Catalina Island Marine Band toured California just before the 1895 summer season, with Hancock Banning playing cornet and publicizing the resort. The entire program fit well with the rise of California's tourist industry and the promotion of southern California as a place to visit, to live, and to invest one's fortune.<sup>19</sup>

The Bannings' promotional machine was especially indebted to Charles F. Holder, professor of zoology at the Throop Institute (predecessor of California Institute of Technology) in Pasadena and a writer and sportsman who tried to preserve and popularize the island's natural setting. Holder authored several books and countless essays on the natural history, archaeology, and history of Santa Catalina. Many of his articles were devoted to sport fishing, his chief interest. He became a promoter extraordinaire with



Exciting stagecoach rides around Farnsworth Loop and other interior roads, many of which were cut into the rocky mountain slopes, were occasionally handled by William Banning, an expert at the reins of a six-horse coach. Banning coaches operated on Catalina as early as 1895, opening up the island's interior to hunters and adventurers. To this day, the use of motor vehicles on the island is restricted.

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This copy of "An Old Survey Map" of Santa Catalina Island circa 1900 was reproduced after World War II by the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary to identify locations along the coastline—including rocks, bays, landings, quarries, caves, and harbors—for boat owners approaching the island.

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, USC SPECIAL COLLECTIONS



Sport fishing, a major island attraction, was portrayed on postcards and promotional material, and photographs of visitors posing proudly with their catch of tuna, swordfish, yellowtail, or other large fish were popular island souvenirs. Here Charles F. Holder (center), conservationist, sportsman, and professor of zoology, whose writings helped promote the island, displays his 227-pound catch with others, circa 1905.

TICOR/PIERCE COLLECTION, CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, USC SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

volumes such as *An Isle of Summer, Santa Catalina* (1901) and *The Channel Islands of California* (1910) and with articles in *Scientific American* and *National Geographic*.<sup>20</sup>

In order to manage and properly finance their venture, the Bannings incorporated the Santa Catalina Island Company in October 1894 as a subsidiary of their holdings. Their stated purpose for the new firm was to manage a general hotel and restaurant business and related operations, to “lay out parks, race courses, places of amusement and entertainment, and conduct the same,” and to operate a telegraph and telephone business between the island and the mainland,

a bathhouse, and a waterworks for irrigation and domestic use.<sup>21</sup>

Business was good and growing during the first two decades of the enterprise. The *Times* reported that about 36,000 passengers visited the island in the eighteen months between May 1892 and December 1893. According to Hancock, despite the national depression of the 1890s, the number of visitors declined only in 1894, the depression’s worst year locally, and the next season was a moneymaker. By 1898, the Bannings had put a third WTC steamer, the *Hermosa*, which had operated years earlier, back into the regular schedule of service.<sup>22</sup>



Besides their principal business of transporting and entertaining visitors, the Bannings also were able to exploit other island resources for different uses. Initially, they took advantage of the island's plentiful rock to supply the contractor charged with construction of the breakwater at San Pedro in 1893. This project was part of a decades-long harbor improvement in which their father had played a key role in convincing the federal government to finance what eventually became one of the world's busiest container ports. The Bannings also developed a quarry to produce serpentine marble—which became popular for decorative furnishings and as exterior trim on buildings in downtown Los Angeles—and continued to raise sheep in the island's interior for their Banning Wool Company. Early on, they leased much of the mountainous interior for cattle grazing to their father's old friend, Arizona rancher Walter Vail, but the lack of adequate water supply and fencing, which allowed Vail's livestock to roam freely into the streets of Avalon, soon ended that venture.<sup>23</sup>

The Bannings' ownership and management of Santa Catalina Island also provided an opportunity for social engagement and family recreation each summer and during the off season. Joseph, the on-site manager, built a cottage at Avalon where he, his wife, Katharine Stewart Banning, and their family lived much of the year. Hancock owned a large two-story residence in Descanso Canyon, a short distance from Avalon, where his spouse, Anne Ophelia Smith Banning, spent most of her summers entertaining relatives and friends. William, the Santa Catalina Island Company president and family patriarch, occasionally visited the island while directing operations of the family businesses from the downtown Los Angeles headquarters.<sup>24</sup>

During these years, the Bannings were at the center of the Santa Catalina social scene, a world populated mostly by the middle class and society's more affluent members who could afford to stay there for a prolonged period of time. Over



*In the 1890s, the Banning brothers—(left to right) William Banning (1858–1946), Joseph Brent Banning (1861–1920), and Hancock Banning (1865–1925)—set out to realize their father's dream to build a pleasure resort on Santa Catalina Island that would rival East Coast and other California seaside vacation spots.*



*During the Banning years, the only people of color on the island were usually company employees in the hotels or on the ranches, or servants who accompanied the more affluent families. In this group photograph of island visitors from Monrovia, circa 1890s, an African American woman (center, background) poses with her employers in front of their tents in the island foothills.*

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, USC SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

the course of a summer, the list of visitors to the island, as regularly reported in Los Angeles newspapers, included countless members of the social elite from southern California, other states, and Canada. Though the Bannings tried unsuccessfully to fill the resort in winter months—as did the Del Coronado—Santa Catalina would become one of the region’s primary summer destinations. “The resort of all resorts” and a “park in the Pacific and a bit of the world itself” is how one contemporary tourist guidebook described it.<sup>25</sup>

As with resorts on both coasts, life on the island during the tourist season offered multiple opportunities for relaxation, recreation, and social intercourse. Some wives and children stayed on the island almost the entire summer while husbands returned to their occupations in Los Ange-

les, Pasadena, and other cities during the week. As owners of most of the island, the Bannings invited family and friends to stay in cottages owned by their company. Selena Galt Ingram, a Banning guest during many summers who kept a diary during her sojourns, described some of the available activities. Older women spent much of their time in leisure pursuits such as playing bridge and planning parties and luncheons. Both men and women played golf and tennis, went boating, attended concerts and dances, and occasionally visited tourist attractions. Young adults spent their time swimming, fishing, sailing, horseback riding, hiking, dancing, and taking advantage of other island amenities. It was a very full vacation experience for all, and a time to further cement and nurture personal and business relationships for the future.<sup>26</sup>

## ISLAND DISCORD

To protect the image of their investment as a family-oriented resort, the Bannings were vigilant concerning adult pleasures for part of the island population. A liquor license for the Metropole was obtained right away, but serving alcohol in other locations posed various dilemmas. William informed Joseph in 1897 that he had heard unfavorable comments about plans to turn Joseph's former home into a restaurant and beer garden, and he warned that if the wrong characters "and particularly women" were seen there, the brothers could have a problem. He recommended that they quietly establish the beer garden at a less noticeable site. In 1902, William cautioned Joseph to be very careful when choosing lessees of their property at the Seal Rock Saloon.<sup>27</sup>

Saloons on the island posed a particular challenge because their owners also allowed illegal gambling. At first the Bannings looked the other way. William informed Joseph in 1896 that until the "gambling proposition becomes noticeable and objectionable it would be well to leave it alone." They would gain patronage if gaming were operated in an orderly manner, and if it did become a problem they could ask the justice of the peace to close the place down. After 1900, gambling became more open, and William recommended its prohibition in saloons located on Banning property to limit adverse publicity. But its pursuit continued in establishments operated by Avalon resident Ben Rosin and Los Angeles entrepreneur Dan Jerrue, with occasional raids by law enforcement authorities.<sup>28</sup>

Even more notorious as a gambling haven was Avalon's Pilgrim Club. Built in 1902 and financed by several wealthy New Yorkers, the Pilgrim was an opulent recreational center with an array of gaming tables "operated as a miniature Monte Carlo." It was "exquisitely furnished with Turkish rugs, heavily stuffed leather furniture, and works of art." The Pilgrim Club occasionally was a thorn in the side of the Bannings and brought unwanted publicity during the county

district attorney's periodic investigations of gambling; it was finally closed down in 1909.<sup>29</sup>

Protecting the social reputation of the island also meant adhering to the era's formal and informal codes of religious and racial restrictions. Resorts throughout the nation at the turn of the century held to strict rules concerning interracial relationships, which barred nonwhites from the more affluent establishments. Jews also were prohibited from staying in many hotels and were asked to look elsewhere for accommodations. Such exclusion policies were especially important to visitors raised in the South, where such rules were enforced more rigorously.<sup>30</sup>

Few Mexican or Asian families in southern California could afford to stay at Santa Catalina during these years, and there were instances of middle-class African Americans who faced discrimination when visiting the island. In 1904, William informed the manager of the Metropole that a number of "colored delegates" coming to the island for a Methodist convention requested accommodations. Lawyers for the company advised the hotel management to respond that the Metropole was full and to suggest that the delegates might be located at another hotel if there was room. They could eat at restaurants around town, but the company employees were counseled to tell the delegates that the hotel staff "would refuse to wait on them" if they entered the dining room and that a number of the guests "would leave." If the delegates demanded to eat at the Metropole, the hotel staff was instructed to "put them in the small dining room and we'll send over a colored waiter if we can find one." In the following year, T. Harry Jones purchased his WTC ticket to vacation at Santa Catalina but was denied a room at the Metropole by the hotel clerk, who told him that "colored people" were not allowed. After this rebuff, he was turned away from a tent location. When he returned to the mainland, he accused hotel employees of intimidating him and filed suit against the company.<sup>31</sup>

Even some potential white customers were unwanted, although they were more difficult to refuse. It is doubtful that many working-class families could afford the transportation fares, lodging, and other costs of even a short stay. Some single men of the middle or working classes were unwelcome, particularly if they were considered “undesirable loafers continually lounging at street corners,” as a Banning representative explained. Single women unaccompanied by family members might conjure suspicions of questionable morals, as was the case in eastern resorts.<sup>32</sup>

Preserving an image of affluence, social appropriateness, and conservative moral values to entice middle-class visitors required the company to enforce social restrictions or find methods to get around them. By prohibiting certain people from their facilities based on their ethnicity or class, the Bannings hoped to keep their island true to the image they projected to their affluent white clientele. As William wrote to a company manager in 1900, their advertisements concerning dancing at the pavilion that season did not exclude anyone by reason of nationality or occupation, but when they would build a new pavilion for the public “we may generally exclude all objectionable persons as heretofore.” With this policy, they upheld a social canon that existed in many, if not most, luxurious resorts around the world for decades to come.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the Bannings’ policy of free amenities for WTC passengers, it took no time at all for competitors to lure customers to the island with the promise of free amenities for a smaller fare. To protect their investment and transportation monopoly, the Bannings enforced their policy of prohibiting all non-WTC ships from landing on their island property. They built fences and other fortifications at various points along the beaches and hired a security force, including former county sheriff John Cline, to thwart the unauthorized landings. The stealth associated with

some of the competitors became a major safety concern when it was reported in 1895 that a U.S. Revenue cutter almost ran down a boat without its lights on at 3 during its attempt to land twenty-two passengers along the coastline.<sup>34</sup>

In the following year, the *Point Loma*, sailing from Long Beach, made several landings at Avalon. On June 23, Joseph, Santa Catalina Island Company official Frank H. Lowe, and John Cline refused to let the passengers disembark. One of them, attorney and future Superior Court Judge Charles Wellborn, demanded access to the U.S. post office to which he was legally entitled. Wellborn was accommodated, and the ladies on the boat were escorted to the Metropole while the Banning forces and the ship’s captain discussed the situation. This incident and others like it resulted in public discourse in Avalon concerning Banning policies. At a meeting in July 1896, most residents who owned lots sided with the Bannings, noting that the family’s huge expenditures for infrastructure and amenities should be respected.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, attempts to land by competing boat captains continued. William ordered the posting of “private property” signs and hired additional “special officers.” At the same time, another launch from Long Beach approached the island and was turned back, but not before one of its passengers, Los Angeles lawyer John Kemp, tried to get ashore. He was chased and caught by the Banning security force, which allegedly dumped him into the water. Kemp later filed suit against the Bannings, but the jury could not agree on a verdict and the case was eventually dropped.<sup>36</sup>

Coastal access by the public to private property—still a contentious issue on California beaches today—raised unwanted legal questions for the Bannings. With possible pressure from court action and a tremendous amount of bad publicity, William suddenly announced in September 1899 that his company would open the port of Avalon to all ships and that the Bannings



would move their amenities to another location. Avalon residents dependent on the tourist trade were alarmed, and some decided to assist the Bannings in keeping intruders out. This was not the first time that they were reminded of what they had to lose. During the *Point Loma* incident, William had instructed Joseph to muster support from the hotel owners and businessmen to back the Banning policy by threatening that the company might reduce its spending in Avalon. William was firm: "If anybody at Avalon takes a decided stand against us please let me know, and we may be able to find some way to bring them in line." In 1900, he informed an Avalon civic leader that all Avalon property owners must sign an agreement to permit the company to prevent landings on their property, and he told Joseph that if they objected, the new sewer would not be built. While the Bannings hoped to retain good relations with their neighbors, adherence to their policy was paramount.<sup>37</sup>

The courts finally overruled the Banning policy as a result of a dispute with a glass-bottom boat concessionaire, the Meteor Boat Company. When a new combination tour package was announced in 1906 that excluded this company, its owners challenged the Banning monopoly first before the county board of supervisors, which had approved the Banning franchise for an Avalon pier, and then before the courts. Three months later, a Meteor ally brought a large group of passengers who broke the ranks of the Banning defense and entered the island. This assault was followed three days later by a meeting of residents who voted to back the Bannings. On the following day, Meteor captain Oliver Hollar led three power launches from Long Beach with about two hundred "volunteers" to invade the Magic Isle. They were met this time by "two hundred deputy constables, many of them Mexicans employed on the Banning ranch," a barbed-wire barricade along part of the beach, and the spray of fire hoses. They still managed to reach the shore, where the captain and two others were arrested for trespass-

ing and then released. No one was injured, and Hancock Banning was cited for his chivalry in making sure that a dozen female intruders were politely allowed to enter the island. With that gesture, more of the men "soon began to trickle through the barricade, and in half an hour the bands were playing and the beer was flowing."<sup>38</sup>

After this invasion, some Avalon residents vehemently protested further Banning plans for a barricade on the beach. Hancock responded that the Bannings were tired of fighting and would stop blocking non-WTC vessels. From then on they would charge for everything they supplied, and Avalon utilities would have to be paid for by its citizens. This policy change came in 1907, when the Meteor lawsuit was finally decided in favor of an open port. The island was now accessible to all comers. Some older residents were reported to be worried that the resort would change, and not for the better.<sup>39</sup>

## CONTESTED PARADISE

During the first fifteen years of Banning ownership, occasional newspaper announcements noted the brothers' intentions to build future improvements at another island location. These were not just threats to keep Avalon residents in line with Banning policies; the Bannings previously had decided to create a second resort venue in order to expand their operation and profits. The drive to develop the isthmus, where the Bannings owned all of the land, began in 1899. Hoping to establish a resort to rival Avalon, they began building water and sanitation facilities, associated buildings, and a new pier. A large number of eucalyptus trees were planted for shade and as a windbreak. Hotels, a tent city, and attractions similar to those at Avalon were contemplated, including a grand hotel to challenge the opulent Metropole. The *Times* reported in 1903 that the Bannings would spend a million dollars on the improvements and that they



*Joseph Banning's plan for the development of the isthmus as a new and wholly owned Banning family resort is superimposed on this circa 1911 photograph, placing envisioned buildings and structures on this site. Behind the wheel of his automobile, a sign of modernity for Catalina, Joseph motors along an undeveloped dirt road.*

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had hired Olmsted Brothers, the nation's most renowned landscape architecture firm, to design the plan.<sup>40</sup>

The possibility of commissioning the prestigious Olmsted Brothers could have anointed the new venture with the promise of success. The firm from Brookline, Massachusetts, agreed to examine the location, and two of its members spent several days at the isthmus in April 1903. Their report recommended a long, undulating road for horses and carriages lined with a guard rail and decorative plantings that would connect the isthmus to Avalon and other points. It identified locations for first- and second-class hotels and other buildings, suggested a cottage village for the residential section with an ornamental "pleasure ground" in the center, and addressed a fresh water supply, underground electrical sources, and sites for service buildings. In all, the report conjured the vision of a resort paradise as picturesque as Avalon.<sup>41</sup>

But the Olmsted project, no doubt an expensive proposition, would not transpire. The Bannings decided to wait a year to allow the eucalyptus time to mature. But the following year, 1904, was not a good one for such an expensive outlay, and

in March 1905, a severe storm flooded the area and blew down most of the trees. These setbacks caused the brothers to put plans for the project on hold.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, improvements at Avalon continued, including a new power plant for electric lighting in 1901, a hillside Greek Amphitheater as a venue for regular concerts by the Santa Catalina Island Marine Band, and a scenic incline railway to transport tourists from Avalon to Lovers Cove for a breathtaking view of the bay. Beginning in 1905, a fireworks show illuminated Avalon bay every Saturday night during the season. Two new steamers, the *Hermosa II* and the *Cabrillo*, increased the capacity for carrying passengers and provided additional luxury for the trip to and from the island.<sup>43</sup>

To finance these and other undertakings, the Bannings searched for an infusion of additional capital. It came in 1901 when George Smith Patton, Hancock's brother-in-law and father of General George S. Patton Jr. of World War II fame, was brought in as a partner and a company director with full voting rights. Patton, who had retired from practicing law in Los Angeles, would become the vice president and general manager

for traction magnate Henry E. Huntington's land company. Under the partnership deal, he owned one-seventh of the Banning property on Santa Catalina and one-seventh of WTC, and each brother owned two-sevenths of both. With their newly acquired funds, the Bannings could afford the permanent improvements planned for Avalon as well as the development of the isthmus, sometimes called Catalina City (now Two Harbors).<sup>44</sup>

These changes ushered in a new era in Banning ownership of Santa Catalina, but the period from about 1906 to 1919 was not as amiable for the company management and Avalon residents as the years preceding it. The five-member board of directors, which included the Banning brothers, Patton, and one of several lawyers from a prestigious Los Angeles law firm, disagreed about the profitability of several ancillary operations,

such as the sheep and stone businesses, and the majority voted to lease or eliminate them. Hancock replaced Joseph as on-site manager in 1907, but the other directors, who were not satisfied with his supervision, hired a general manager and gave William a more authoritative role. The 1907 decision to open the port of Avalon to non-WTC vessels posed an additional challenge to the Bannings' control of the island, and the directors responded by renewing their interest in the isthmus as a profitable resort opportunity. After the 1908 season, they began making improvements at Catalina City, and rumors of moving the entire operation there resurfaced, as they did whenever community opposition flared up in Avalon.<sup>45</sup>

Despite good relations between the Bannings and most Avalon residents during the 1890s, there always had been complaints regarding specific



*The Santa Catalina Island Marine Band was a fixture on the island since 1895, playing several times a day and nightly in the dancing pavilion during the tourist season. The band took up permanent residence at the Greek Amphitheater in Avalon in 1904.*

COURTESY OF THE CATALINA ISLAND MUSEUM

company policies. After the turn of the century, the number of dissenters gradually increased. They criticized the Banning transportation monopoly, even to the point of helping “intruders” to land on the island, and complained about the need for improvements to Avalon’s streets and water system, the seemingly high shipping rates to the mainland, and the policy of prohibiting lessees from buying their home sites. Their dissent became the nucleus of a movement to take control of the town by incorporating it as a city and electing representatives to direct its future.<sup>46</sup>

Opposition to the Bannings was countered in 1908 by a group of residents who tried to ameliorate the protests. William reported to the company directors that a permanent committee of “conservative property owners at Avalon” had formed to work with them on needed improvements and to close the port again to competitors. He and leaders of this group came to agreement on improving streets and providing electric lighting and additional amenities.<sup>47</sup>

The success of these negotiations led to the formal incorporation of the Freeholders Improvement Association of Avalon in May 1909. The association became the arbitration organization for the Bannings and their opposition, although the Freeholders were mostly Banning sympathizers. In fact, one director was company official Frank H. Lowe. Over the next few years, the association worked to resolve residents’ complaints and operated some of the facilities, including the Pleasure Pier, which was built by the Bannings in 1909 and used to provide services to sightseers.<sup>48</sup>

The partnership between the Bannings and the association solved some problems but certainly not all. By 1913, *Catalina Wireless* newspaper editor Willis M. LeFavor, Avalon building contractor Arthur G. Woodman, and several merchants brought to a head opposition to Banning control of Avalon. In the previous general election, an

approved county home rule charter gave the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors power to establish local option restrictions on liquor sales and delivery in unincorporated county areas such as Avalon. By that time, Prohibition sentiment throughout the region was very strong, and saloon interests threatened by county action fought to save their businesses. In Avalon, they joined with those who opposed Banning policies in a cityhood movement so that these decisions would be made by fellow town residents. As the *Times* pointed out, before 1913 the saloon owners adamantly resisted incorporation and more taxes, but “today, incorporation to the ‘wets’ means liberty, better conditions and representative government and, it is alleged, several saloons.”<sup>49</sup>

The Bannings claimed to be neutral on the issue, but it was understood after years of reported threats that they might close amenities, end financial support for Avalon utilities, and move their operation to Catalina City at the isthmus if cityhood passed. The prevailing sentiment was not with the Bannings or the Freeholders, however, and in the June 1913 election, the town’s residents favored incorporation by a vote of 132 to 88.<sup>50</sup>

Defeated by the dissidents, the Bannings adjusted to the new municipality. Initially, the company continued to operate city utilities. In the meantime, the Freeholders defended the Bannings’ transportation monopoly. Vigilance against interlopers included “Hired Huskies,” who sprayed men and women with fire hoses on the Pleasure Pier, an action the Freeholders justified by asserting that the intruders did not pay the fee to enter and were bringing in liquor, which some claimed as cause of rowdy behavior and street litter.<sup>51</sup>

By 1914, Avalon’s municipal finances already were becoming strained when city trustees called for an election to approve \$130,000 in bonds to purchase the Banning sewer system, electric light plant, water system, and gas plant. The pro-



posal was overwhelmingly defeated in March by residents unwilling to take on such debt. Amid discussions of belt tightening and even talk of disincorporation, the trustees began negotiations that led to an agreement to allow the Freeholders to manage municipal affairs in a partnership with city officials and the Santa Catalina Island Company. The Bannings promised to provide a free band for concerts and dancing, to take care of city utilities, to donate land for a city cemetery, and to allow the Freeholders to conduct a competing transportation service at their own wharf. "Freeholders Rejoice Over Avalon's Prospect" was the title of a newspaper story describing these developments in mid-1915.<sup>52</sup>

## WINDS OF CHANGE

The Avalon peace pact coincided with the increasing popularity of the automobile that transformed tourism in southern California and the rest of the nation in the 1910s. While older and wealthier Americans continued to spend long summers at grand resort hotels, many middle-class and affluent families—including the Bannings—spent some of their vacations and idle hours motoring to tourist destinations for sightseeing and recreational pursuits. The Good Roads movement in California stimulated highway construction after 1909 that made accessibility to new localities more convenient and flexible. The economic possibilities for the tourist trade at Santa Catalina Island now were much different than in the decades before.<sup>53</sup>

The impact was quite noticeable for the Bannings' profit line as island losses were absorbed by the family's other businesses almost every year after 1911. But even more devastating was a catastrophe in Avalon that struck just hours before dawn on November 29, 1915, when a fire destroyed a large section of the municipality. Beginning about 3:30 A.M., the inferno, fanned by strong winds, traveled rapidly through the eastern and downtown districts and burned over half of

the city's structures to the ground. The poorly equipped volunteer fire department was no match for the conflagration, even with the Pacific Ocean in the immediate vicinity. The Metropole, five other major hotels, and several smaller hotels and rooming houses vanished, along with the Pilgrim Club, the Tuna Club, the main bathhouse, a number of waterfront shops, and countless wooden and tent cottages. An estimated two hundred persons were left homeless, though fortunately there were no fatalities or major injuries.<sup>54</sup>

The cause of the fire was believed to be arson. Some Avalon residents claimed that the blaze was started by the owner of a small hotel who owed a considerable amount of money and hoped to collect on the insurance. Others singled out a group of residents who opposed Banning policies, as the fire appeared to be ignited in several locations simultaneously. The Los Angeles County District Attorney's office investigated for quite some time, but no one was ever prosecuted as the incendiary. Hancock Banning Jr. recalled that upon his return to Avalon the day after the fire, he spoke to a priest about the destruction, which had stopped just short of the Catholic Church at one site and Ben Rosin's saloon at another. The padre concluded that the Lord must have intervened to save the church. Hancock Jr. responded that if that were true, the devil must have saved the saloon.<sup>55</sup>

Immediately after the fire, the Bannings debated whether to rebuild the smoldering structures or move their operation to the isthmus. The Metropole and other Banning buildings were insured, but reviving Avalon would require a major outlay of funds. By early 1916, they decided to clear away the wreckage, build a new bathhouse, repair the streets, and erect a new tent city and a "first class café" for visitors. As might be expected, that year's tourist season was dismal. Brochures reminded guests that WTC tickets were required in order to take advantage of Banning amenities, but the amenities were few. Additionally, the



*Years of conflict at Avalon were exacerbated by a fire in 1915, which destroyed a large portion of the city and became an important consideration in the Bannings' sale of the island to chewing-gum magnate William Wrigley Jr. in 1919.*

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absence of a grand hotel kept away those seeking more luxurious accommodations. After the season, the Bannings negotiated a trust deed for \$850,000 to pay off debts and build a new major tourist hotel in or near Avalon.<sup>56</sup>

The new resort hotel was delayed as the company directors debated its location. After a year of discussion and another unprofitable tourist season, they agreed to erect the structure at Descanso Canyon. The St. Catherine Hotel was built under Hancock's direction and completed in June 1918, just in time for the start of the season.<sup>57</sup>

The opening of the St. Catherine did not change the direction of the Bannings' investment. At the season's close, Hancock was confident that he could turn a profit if he could buy out the other Santa Catalina Island Company owners and manage the island himself. But he did not have the resources or a loan in hand, and the other directors agreed that it was time to sell. Though they had turned down several offers for the island over the last two decades, an opportunity would soon surface that they would not pass up.<sup>58</sup>

In early 1919, a new buyer's offer determined the disposition of Santa Catalina Island. William Wrigley Jr., the Chicago chewing-gum maker and owner of the Chicago Cubs baseball club, told William Banning that he had been "a good boy all through the war, and paid his taxes, and now he was going to play with the island." Wrigley owned a stately winter home in Pasadena and was aware of the charm of Santa Catalina Island. Along with two partners, he proposed to purchase the Bannings' interests in the island and WTC for about three million dollars. The sale was announced in February 1919.<sup>59</sup>

William Banning arranged the sale's protocol and headed the negotiations. He was relieved to find an end to declining profits, though some believed he may have been pressured to sell his interests by lenders who had helped to finance the St. Catherine Hotel and who had found that it could not be insured at a reasonable price due to the lack of firefighting resources. Joseph, who usually agreed with his older brother, and Patton, who probably feared further losses, deferred to Wil-

liam. Hancock tried one last time to thwart the sale, but he finally agreed to transfer his stock. The company directors and officers resigned; Wrigley's team replaced them.<sup>60</sup>

Although the island no longer belonged to the Bannings, William remained on the board of the Santa Catalina Island Company for another decade to help with the transition. With their companies gone, the Bannings sold their remaining interests at the harbor and formally dissolved their business in August 1920. By that time, the family was no longer involved with the resort operated by the three brothers or the shipping business initiated by their father in the 1850s.<sup>61</sup>

#### PRIVATE COUNTRY CLUB OR PUBLIC RESORT?

The Banning heyday at Santa Catalina coincided with the continuing transformation of American resorts in the early twentieth century. Some East Coast resorts were becoming privatized and exclusive for the wealthy, and others more commercialized for everyone else. Western resorts commodified Native American material culture as well as a host of Americana related to the West's natural features and travel by automobile or other means. Eventually, resorts became more specialized in their offerings: some were developed as havens of gambling and adult entertainment, some as fantasylands, and some, such as Graceland in Nashville, as memorials to cultural and historical icons.<sup>62</sup>

The Banning family's ownership of Santa Catalina Island reflected pre-1900 values, such as social status and social control, race relations, public access to private property, and company town-like business practices of the more affluent who held the upper hand in society. As a very sympathetic *Times* admitted in 1907, the Bannings operated Avalon "more like a private country club than a public resort." But as change traversed the region and nation, their island resort would follow the trajectory of a more

modern tourism. Banning policies governing the island—the ban on selling lots to private owners, preventing the landing of independent vessels, and strict rules of social control (except for racial exclusion)—were loosened or eliminated late in the Progressive Era as older views of the 1890s Gilded Age came to terms with the modernism of post-World War I America.<sup>63</sup>

The end of the Banning era at Santa Catalina opened a new opportunity for developing the Magic Isle. William Wrigley was not as concerned with profits, and he added new features over the years, including a baseball field and other facilities to support his Chicago Cubs during spring training. As Santa Catalina embraced a new 1920s California lifestyle, the island became a more active and casual venue, a playground for film and sports celebrities, a set for motion pictures, and a home for more modern entertainment. Today, Avalon is still a popular resort, emblematic of the southern California image, while the nonprofit Santa Catalina Island Conservancy is responsible for the conservation of most of the vast interior and coastline of the island.<sup>64</sup>

An elderly Avalon resident summed up the Bannings' twenty-seven-year rule of Santa Catalina Island by concluding that it "wasn't democratic, but they did maintain order." Indeed, there was order on the Magic Isle, and also beauty, sunshine, and romance befitting a paradise, but like all earthly places, Santa Catalina's perfection was incomplete.<sup>65</sup>

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